

The same fight, a different story

A comparative media framing analysis of the Battle
of Raqqa in the online coverage of CNN and RT

by

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Abstract

While the watchdog journalism ideal emphasises the importance of critical and objective news coverage to inform citizens and protect the democratic process, the coverage of political conflicts overseas can differ between nations and might reflect the agendas and narratives preferred by respective governments in power. Over the past few years, a rivalry has emerged between the United States and Russia over Syria with each country having conflicting interests in defeating the terrorist organisation Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in its self-declared capital Raqqa. This thesis explores how the largest international news channels in the United States and Russia – CNN and RT – framed the Battle of Raqqa and to what extent their online coverage reflects the narratives of their respective government’s foreign policy and ideology. This study not only extends the media framing theory by applying it to a recent conflict but also provides much-needed analysis comparing CNN with RT by directly comparing their online coverage of the defeat of the terrorist organisation in Raqqa. Moreover, it reveals preliminary findings on the under-researched news broadcaster RT. To examine how both news channels framed the battle, this thesis uses Semetko & Valkenburg’s (2000) frame taxonomy. The valence of the news frames and the sources have also been analysed. Overall, the study found that CNN framed the battle positively by using the conflict frame to emphasise the importance of the battle, while RT stressed the civilian casualties inflicted by the United States-led coalition by using the responsibility frame, which puts the battle in a negative light. These findings suggest that the coverage of both news channels reflects the agendas and narratives preferred by their respective governments, which raises concerns about the idealised role of journalists as watchdogs of society and may invite accusations of biased reporting.

‘The first casualty when war comes is truth’

- Hiram W. Johnson, 1917

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The terrorist organisation Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) started conquering more and more land in Syria and Iraq from 2014 and the organisation has been a stability and security threat to the entire world since then (Gonchar 2014). With Raqqa as its self-declared capital, ISIS had the power to build its own government and rule their de facto Islamic State (Caris & Reynolds 2014). However, its heyday came to an end when the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by the United States (U.S.), started a military offensive against the organisation in its self-declared capital on 6 June 2017, known as the Battle of Raqqa (Said & Perry 2017). After a five-month battle, the SDF officially announced the recapture of Raqqa on 20 October 2017. Although the Battle of Raqqa is known as a significant defeat for ISIS, in a wider context it can also be seen as part of the ongoing proxy war between the U.S. and Russia in Syria (Micallef 2016; O'Connor 2017). Even though Russia was also fighting ISIS in its capital Raqqa, it was the U.S.-led coalition that would claim the recapture of the city and the victory over ISIS. As a result of this proxy war, there is a clear difference between how official sources from the U.S. and Russia describe the battle. For example, the U.S. government described it as a 'liberation' (Tillerson 2017), whereas Russian officials emphasised the civilian casualties and destruction of the city (Osborn 2017). So, government officials from both countries present the Battle of Raqqa emphasising their own agendas.

The way citizens think about the battle and what they know about it, depends on the coverage of the news media. According to Lippmann (1922, p. 16), 'the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance'. To manage the complex phenomena in our environment, people rely on the media and in this way media create, what Lippmann (1922) calls in his book *Public Opinion*, the 'pictures in our heads'. This is especially the case with political conflicts overseas, such as the Battle of Raqqa. As firsthand knowledge about these conflicts is unattainable for many, audiences worldwide turn to the news media to learn about these conflicts (Cozma 2015, p. 438). Quality coverage of these conflicts is therefore of great importance and some scholars argue that journalists should act as watchdogs of society, monitoring the government's use and abuse of power (McNair 2009, p. 239; Norris 2014, p. 525). However, the news coverage of political conflicts overseas can differ between each country's news organisation (Damanhoury & Saleh 2017, p. 86). A possible

reason for the different coverage is that news outlets serve as a propaganda tool for the state and reflect its foreign policy and ideology (Herman & Chomsky 2008).

Given the different presentation of the Battle of Raqqa by the U.S. and Russian government officials and the close relationship between media and state which can sometimes occur, this study examines how the Battle of Raqqa was framed by the countries' two largest international news channels: CNN and RT. Although several scholars have extensively studied the media framing of ISIS (Al-Majdhoub & Hamzha 2016; Vadhavkar 2016; Zhang & Hellmueller 2016), a framing analysis on the defeat of the terrorist organisation has not been done yet. The Battle of Raqqa was a significant defeat because the organisation lost its self-declared capital. Moreover, given that both the U.S. and Russia are important global powers in determining the ongoing Syrian Conflict, directly comparing their largest international news channels provides a further understanding of some of the dominant narratives within each country. Additionally, there is just one study (Ali & Omar 2016) which directly compares CNN and RT during the conflicts in Syria and therefore further analysis is needed.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold. Firstly, to examine and compare the framing of the Battle of Raqqa in the online coverage of CNN and RT, which leads to the first research question:

RQ 1: How did CNN and RT frame the Battle of Raqqa in their online coverage and what are the differences between both news channels?

Secondly, this study explores the relationship between CNN and RT and their respective governments by comparing the online coverage of both news outlets with the narratives preferred by their respective government officials, which leads to the second research question:

RQ 2: To what extent does the coverage of the Battle of Raqqa of CNN and RT reflect the narratives of their respective government's foreign policy and ideology?

By answering these questions, this study not only contributes to the media framing theory by extending it to a new case study of a contemporary conflict, but it also contributes to filling several important gaps within the scholarly literature around conflict reporting. Firstly, it is the first time that a study directly compares CNN and RT and their coverage of the defeat of ISIS in Raqqa. Secondly, this study also contributes to a gap in the research on RT. Although the Russian news channel has received a lot of journalistic attention, little academic analysis has

been done on the online coverage of the Russian news broadcaster (Yablokov 2015). Finally, this thesis provides an opportunity to reflect on media practices by showing how journalists cover stories in hard-to-access areas – such as Raqqa – and the possible influence of a government's foreign policy and ideology on this coverage. Therefore, besides resolving the two research questions, this thesis will also discuss the media practice of both news outlets and what their coverage means for the idealised role of journalists as watchdogs of society.

The structure of this thesis is designed to present a comprehensive case for the dominant frames used in CNN and RT and their implications for journalism. The following chapter starts with a review of the literature on the Battle of Raqqa and the U.S.-Russian proxy war; the symbiotic relationship between media, democracy and foreign policy and gives an extensive overview of the media framing theory. Chapter three describes and justifies the methodology and its application. Chapter four will present and discuss the key data and findings. Chapter five will further discuss these data and findings, resolve the two research questions and reflect on the media practice of both news outlets. Finally, chapter six will summarise the key findings, give an overall conclusion, discuss the limitations of this study and make recommendations for future research on this topic.

Chapter 2

Literature review

This chapter starts with explaining the Battle of Raqqa and the related conflicting interests of the U.S. and Russia to get a better understanding of the case and relevance of this study. It then describes the watchdog ideal of journalism and the related concerns about the symbiotic relationships between media, democracy and foreign policy. Finally, it discusses the scholarly work on media framing theory and previous framing studies on conflicts in the Middle East.

2.1 The Battle of Raqqa

This study explores how CNN and RT framed the Battle of Raqqa in their online coverage. The Battle of Raqqa is part of a broader history of recent conflict and escalation in the Middle East wherein the Arab Spring is of key importance. This revolutionary wave – advocating for democracy – began in Tunisia in December 2010 and found its way to Syria in March 2011 (Lundgren-Jörum 2012, p. 11; Pollack et al. 2011, p. 16), which marked the beginning of the Syrian Civil War (Taleb et al. 2015, pp. 63-64). Due to the power vacuum in Raqqa during the Syrian Uprising, the city fell into hands of several moderate rebel groups led by Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra in 2013 but was conquered by ISIS in 2014. The latter declared Raqqa as the capital city of their de facto Islamic State (Caris & Reynolds 2014, p. 11; Hassan 2017, p. 2). ISIS built its own government in the city which included ‘religious, educational, judicial, security, humanitarian, and infrastructure projects’ (Caris & Reynolds 2014, p. 4). After years of oppression, torture and murder, the SDF decided to recapture the city of Raqqa from ISIS (Said & Perry 2017). The SDF is a Kurdish-dominated militia equipped and supported by the U.S. to fight ISIS alongside other local militias (Casagrande 2016; Hassan 2017, p. 2). It turned out that the SDF was the most efficient partner the Americans could hope for to defeat ISIS in northeast Syria (Casagrande 2016, pp. 2-4; Hassan 2017).

When the SDF announced the recapture of Raqqa on 6 June 2017, a military offensive came from the north, east and west of the city, and the Mashlab district – where ISIS rebels were hiding – was attacked with the support of U.S. air raids (Said & Perry 2017). According to Hassan (2017, p. 5), the Battle of Raqqa differs from the other battles against ISIS because the rebels in Raqqa were less committed to fighting. The reason for this low commitment to the caliphate is that many ISIS fighters in Raqqa pledged allegiance to the organisation out of fear instead of ideology (Hassan 2017, p. 5). Despite the weak defence, the U.S. and the SDF

understood that the Battle of Raqqa would still be a long and deadly battle (Hassan 2017, p. 6; Said & Perry 2017). The presence of 4,000 ISIS fighters and the use of snipers and suicide bombers slowed down the U.S.-backed Kurdish offensive (Hassan 2017, pp. 5-7; Said & Perry 2017). The five-month Battle of Raqqa was eventually concluded after the conquest of the National Hospital (Davison & Rodi 2017). The SDF declared the official recapture of the city and victory over ISIS on 20 October 2017.

U.S.-Russian proxy war

However, the fight against ISIS in Raqqa was not only fought by the U.S.-backed SDF, but also by President Bashar al-Assad's Russian-backed Syrian Army (Micallef 2016; O'Connor 2017). In the months prior to the official military offensive of the SDF, the Syrian Army was attempting to advance on Raqqa from the southwest, while the SDF were advancing from the northwest of the city (Micallef 2016). In this context, the lead up to the Battle of Raqqa can be seen as a race between the U.S.-backed SDF and the Russian-backed Syrian Army in order to claim the liberation of the terrorist organisation's de facto capital Raqqa (Micallef 2016; O'Connor 2017). Therefore, in a broader context, this race can be seen as a proxy war between the U.S. and Russia. A victory for the Syrian Army would accentuate the success of the Kremlin's intervention during the Syrian Civil War and the fight against ISIS and undermine the U.S. foreign policy in Syria, whereas a victory for the SDF would make it possible for the U.S. to claim that they have successfully defeated ISIS in their war on terror, and justify their military presence in Syria (Micallef 2016).

As described earlier, it was the U.S.-backed SDF that would claim the recapture of the city and the victory over ISIS. Following the rivalry between the U.S. and Russia, government officials from both countries responded differently on the takeover of Raqqa. On 20 October, the U.S.'s former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson expressed the outcome of the battle positively in an official statement:

We congratulate the Syrian people and the Syrian Democratic Forces, including the Syrian Arab Coalition, on the liberation of Raqqa. The United States is proud to lead the 73-member Global Coalition that supported this effort, which has seen ISIS's so-called caliphate crumble across Iraq and Syria. Our work is far from over, but the liberation of Raqqa is a critical milestone in the global fight against ISIS and underscores the success of the ongoing international and Syrian effort to defeat these terrorists (Tillerson 2017).

On the other hand, chief spokesman for the Russian Defence Ministry Major-General Igor Konashenkov stressed the civilian casualties and destruction of the city inflicted by the U.S.-led airstrikes (Osborn 2017). He also compared Raqqa with the fate of Dresden in 1945, as cited by Osborn (2017): ‘wiped off the face of the earth by Anglo-American bombardments’.

The conflicting interests of the U.S. and Russia are obvious and government officials from both countries talk about the Battle of Raqqa in a different way. By identifying the frames and classifying the sources in the online coverage of CNN and RT, this study will show how these two important news channels of both countries presented the Battle of Raqqa and to what extent their coverage reflects the statements of their respective governments.

2.2 Media, democracy and foreign policy

Within the scholarly literature, there exists an idealised role of journalists as watchdogs of society and the importance of it for a functioning democracy (McNair 2009, pp. 238-239; Norris 2014, p. 525). Media organisations claim to tell the truth and are understood as having the power to shape our opinion about cultural, social and political institutions (Couldry 2012, pp. 21-22). In practice, by enabling deliberations between citizens and their representatives, media are important to the democratic process (Habermas 1991, p. 3; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch 2009). As an ideal, to fulfil the role of ‘democratic pillar’, journalists must be ‘objective reporters of political reality, striving to be as neutral and detached as possible, even though they will hold their own political views’ (McNair 2009, pp. 238-239). As an extension of this informative function, journalists are commonly understood as the watchdogs of society, monitoring the government’s use of power and disclose the abuse of power in order to protect the democratic process and its citizens (McNair 2009, p. 239; Norris 2014, p. 525). To conduct this idealised role as watchdogs, journalists should be objective, factual and critical in their coverage (Waisbord 2000). Furthermore, journalists should challenge the government powers instead of being loyal to them (Hanitzsch 2007, p. 373). In this way, watchdog journalism can also be seen as the fourth estate (Hanitzsch 2007, p. 373; McNair 2009, p. 239; Norris 2014, p. 525). Since the watchdog ideal is a liberal conception that is most prevalent in Anglo-American democracies because of their long tradition of scepticism towards government leaders (Norris 2014, p. 525), it is appropriate to hold the independent and free news channel CNN against this liberal ideal. Even though RT is headquartered in Russia – a non-Anglo-American society – the Russian news channel positions itself as absolutely independent and not reflecting Russia’s political views (RT 2013). Therefore, I will also hold RT against this idealised role of journalists as watchdogs of society and reflect on its media practice.

However, the watchdog ideal can come under pressure when journalists become loyal to their political leaders and serve as a propaganda tool for their government (Hanitzsch 2007, p. 374). This can happen when the equal balance of symbiotic relations between media and foreign policy becomes one-sided. Within the scholarly literature around the role of news media, democracy and foreign policy, there are concerns about the objectivity of journalists covering political conflicts and how this affects media practice, democracy and foreign policy. Many scholars have written about media in relation to foreign policy. A popular theory in this field is the CNN-effect. CNN's live coverage of the Gulf War in 1991 was a turning point in the history of the media (Gilboa 2005, p. 28). By providing information and showing real-time images of the Gulf War, the American news media's coverage was seen to influence U.S. decision-makers to take action and change policy (Gilboa 2005). As result, the so-called 'CNN-effect' was born, which states that media have the power to influence the government foreign policy, especially in the case of humanitarian crises (Gilboa 2005; McPhail 2006, pp. 156-157). A well-known socio-economic theory contesting the CNN-effect is the so-called 'propaganda model', developed by Herman and Chomsky (2008). The propaganda model is the opposite of the 'watchdog model' and details how news media are used in the service of the state as a tool to shape and mobilise public support for government policy and actions (Herman & Chomsky 2008, pp. 1-33). One important structural factor that enables this to occur is when news media heavily rely predominantly on information from government or proxy-government institutions and spokespeople (Herman & Chomsky 2008, p. 2). In this way, news organisations can be influenced by a government's foreign policy and ideology.

This study examines the similarities between the online coverage of the Battle of Raqqa of CNN and RT and the narratives preferred by their respective government's foreign policy and ideology. Especially in the case of political conflicts overseas, critical and objective media are important. As firsthand knowledge about overseas conflicts is unattainable for many, there is an inevitable heavily reliance on available news media to learn about these conflicts (Cozma 2015, p. 438). However, the coverage of these conflicts can differ between each country's news organisation (Damanhoury & Saleh 2017, p. 86). Whereas all these news organisations may claim to tell the truth (Couldry 2012, pp. 21-22), this truth can be seen by others as 'biased reporting' or even 'propaganda' (Hachten & Scotton 2011, p. 9). El-Nawawy and Iskandar (2003, p. 209) refer to this as 'contextual objectivity', which means that journalists try to be as objective as possible in their coverage but colouring it with the perspective of the medium they work for. This explains and justifies why the coverage of the same conflict can differ between each country's news organisation. By introducing this term, El-Nawawy and Iskandar (2003)

acknowledge that objectivity is always contextualised within the environment in which a news network is broadcasting. Researching this ‘contextual objectivity’ is important because it highlights the question of *how* journalists report on political conflicts and how various biases may affect journalism practice, as I will show in the case of the Battle of Raqqa.

As described, previous scholars have highlighted the increasingly close relationship between state and news media that can sometimes occur in shaping the meaning and significance of overseas conflicts which are geographically and culturally remote from the intended audience. This thesis will explore these complex relations between media, democracy and foreign policy in case of the Battle of Raqqa by examining how CNN and RT framed the battle and to what extent their coverage reflects the agendas and narratives of their respective governments in power. Furthermore, this study will reflect on the media practice of both news outlets and how their coverage affects the idealised role of journalists as watchdogs of society.

2.3 Media framing theory

This thesis builds on the media framing theory by exploring which frames CNN and RT adopted in their online coverage of the Battle of Raqqa. Gitlin (1980, p. 7) defines news frames as ‘persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual’. Although the classic starting point for news media practice is objectivity, in practice journalists present events and issues in a certain way by using such frames to understand the events they are reporting on and to present large amounts of information efficiently and understandable to their public (Brewer, Ryan & Gross 2010, p. 159; Gitlin 1980, p. 7). This process of emphasising certain issues and topics while omitting or marginalising others is called ‘frame-building’ (De Vreese 2005, p. 52).

Whilst media framing theory is the theoretical framework of this thesis, the approach I am taking also incorporates concerns and theories around audience. By highlighting certain aspects of an event and omitting others, media prioritize information which give them the power to influence how news consumers interpret and evaluate information which affects their knowledge about political institutions and their policy (De Vreese 2005; Gitlin 1980; Neuman, Just & Crigler 1992, p. 60; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000, p. 94; Zeng & Tahat 2012, p. 435). Initially, frames are used to give an angle to a news story. But then these frames have a significant impact on the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes of the news consumers (Tewksbury & Scheufele 2009, p. 19). This opinion-shaping process is called ‘frame-setting’ (De Vreese 2005, p. 52).

Previous scholarly work shows that related to ‘frame-setting’ is the valence of the news frames (De Vreese 2005; De Vreese & Boomgaarden 2003; Nelson, Clawson & Oxley 1997). Valence refers to the overall tone of voice of a news story, which can be positive or negative (De Vreese & Boomgaarden 2003, p. 363). Nelson, Clawson and Oxley (1997) and De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2003) conclude in their studies that news stories that are inherently valent by using positive frames lead to a significantly higher level of support for government policy than negative frames. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to examine how the frames affected the public’s support for government policy during the Battle of Raqqa, this study will reveal the valence of the frames used by CNN and RT and discuss its appearance.

Typology of news frames

The exploration of news and conflict that I will be presenting here involves a typology of news frames based on the most common generic frames in framing literature today (An & Gower 2009; De Vreese 2005; Neuman, Just & Crigler 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000). By analysing over 2,500 Dutch newspaper stories and more than 1,500 Dutch television news stories, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) concluded in their study about the framing of European politics in Dutch media that the five most common generic frames are the conflict frame, the human interest frame, the economic consequence frame, the morality frame and the responsibility frame.

The conflict frame emphasises conflict between and among individuals, groups, or institutions (De Vreese 2005, p. 56; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000, p. 95). The human interest frame focuses on the human side of news events or issues and therefore journalists use an emotional angle of approach (De Vreese 2005, p. 56; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000, p. 95). The economic consequences frame describes the consequences of an event or issue in terms of financial benefits and losses it will have on individuals, groups, institutions or countries (De Vreese 2005, p. 56; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000, p. 96). The morality frame describes an event or issue in terms of ‘religious tenets’ or ‘moral prescriptions’ (De Vreese 2005, p. 56; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000, p. 96). Finally, the responsibility frame describes an issue or problem in terms of to whom the responsibility can be attributed for causing or solving the issue or problem, to either an individual, group or a government (De Vreese 2005, p. 56; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000, p. 96). Whilst issue-specific frames only apply to certain events or topics, these generic frames are applicable to different events, topics and cultural contexts (De Vreese 2005, pp. 53-54). Therefore, the five generic frames are key to this thesis.

News sources

Since news sources affect media framing, exploring sourcing is of key importance to this study. On the one hand, journalists can frame a news story by making certain sources more salient than others (Entman 1993, p. 52). On the other hand, sources can influence the frames adopted by the journalist (Cozma 2015, p. 437; Entman 1993, pp. 56-57; Liebler & Bendix 1996; Shoemaker & Reese 1996, pp. 169-173). This is especially evident in conflict reporting because every counterparty tries to promote his own view of the conflict in the news media in order to mobilize political support and understanding (Wolfsfeld 1997, p. 2). Careful selection of sources is therefore important for the final news product (Cozma 2015, p. 437).

Although many scholars state that source diversity is important (Cozma 2006; Entman 1993, pp. 56-57; Gitlin 1980; Hansen 1991; Liebler & Bendix 1996), previous research has found that news media often rely on the same kind of government sources and public officials (Bennett 1990; Gans 1979, pp. 144-145; Sigal 1973). The reason for this is the 'regular flow of authoritative information' (Shoemaker & Reese 1996, p. 171). More related to the case of this thesis, Wolfsfeld (1997, p. 4) argues that in conflict reporting the antagonists that succeed in getting the power and control over the political environment are more likely to dominate the news stories and influence the frames adopted by journalists.

Since Raqqa has been one of the most isolated places on earth for the past few years, it is interesting to see which sources CNN and RT relied upon to cover the Battle of Raqqa. Therefore, this study analyses and categorises the sources and their frequency in the online coverage of both news outlets.

Recent framing studies on the Syrian Civil War

Previous scholars have extensively researched media framing during the Arab Spring and conflicts across the Middle East, such as the Iraq War, the Israeli-Lebanon war and smaller conflicts in the town of Jenin in the West Bank (Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern 2007; Evans 2010; Ha 2015; Kara & Atabey 2013; Melki 2014). More related to this study, scholars have also extensively studied the framing of ISIS (Al-Majdhoub & Hamzha 2016; Vadhavkar 2016; Zhang & Hellmueller 2016). Both differences and similarities have been found in the presentation of ISIS in newspapers in America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

Despite the extensive research on media framing in the Middle East in general and on ISIS in particular, little attention has been paid to the defeat of the terrorist organisation and how this is framed by the media of the U.S. and Russia, two important external powers during the defeat of ISIS in Syria. Just one peer-reviewed journal article has been published comparing

the coverage CNN and RT during the Syrian Civil War (Ali & Omar 2016). Ali and Omar (2016) studied how the Russian military intervention in the Syrian Civil War was presented by CNN and RT in their online coverage. By using Halliday's transitivity model within the critical discourse analysis (CDA), they show that CNN and RT both present the Russian military intervention in Syria in favour of the political ideology of their countries. Therefore, they conclude that news media are not merely used as information distributor, but also as 'discursive and social power over the audience and recipients' (Ali & Omar 2016, p. 139). However, further analysis of both news outlets is needed to explore and discuss these preliminary findings further. This study contributes to this gap and compares how CNN and RT covered the Battle of Raqqa by using the media framing theory.

Chapter 3

Methodology

To examine how CNN and RT framed the Battle of Raqqa in their online news coverage, a frame and content analysis were conducted. Frame analysis was used as the primary method to analyse how both news channels framed the battle in their online coverage. After the frame analysis, a content analysis was undertaken to examine the overall trends and patterns in the online coverage of CNN and RT. This chapter describes and justifies both methods and explains the coding categories in its application and the choices behind the research design.

3.1 Approach

Frame analysis

Frames in the news can be analysed by using an inductive or deductive approach (De Vreese 2005, pp. 53-54; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000, p. 94). Whereas an inductive approach allows the researcher to reveal the presence of possible frames without a clear definition of the frames in advance (Semetko & Valkenburg 2000, p. 94), a deductive approach is based on a priori defined generic frames to investigate which of them are present in a news story (De Vreese 2005, p. 53; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000, p. 94). Since an inductive approach is too broad and subjective, hard to replicate and often consists of a small sample size, many scholars have argued in favour of applying a deductive method using generic frames (Cappella & Jamieson 1997, p. 47; De Vreese 2005, p. 53; Tankard 2001, p. 98). To enhance the objectivity, replicability and validity of this study, a deductive approach was chosen based on the most common generic frames in the literature today, which are the conflict frame, the human interest frame, the economic consequence frame, the morality frame and the responsibility frame (An & Gower 2009; De Vreese 2005; Iyengar 1991; Neuman, Just & Crigler 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000). Another reason for the deductive approach based on generic frames is that it makes cross-national differences visible (De Vreese 2005, p. 59). Since the purpose of this study is to examine the differences in framing between the two largest international broadcasters in the U.S. and Russia – CNN and RT – a deductive approach was most suitable for the analysis.

However, a limitation of a deductive approach is that the frames are predetermined and therefore there is a risk that other frames or patterns can be missed during the analysis of the articles (Matthes & Kohring 2008, pp. 262-263). To partly overcome this weakness, a more

inductive approach was chosen to simultaneously examine the valence of the news frames. By using loosely defined preconceptions of positive, negative and neutral frames, the articles were extensively read and analysed, and notes were taken. Although it is not a fully-fledged inductive approach, it still makes it possible to examine new patterns and trends. The measurement of the news valence will be further elaborated in the application section below.

Content analysis

After the frame analysis was conducted, a content analysis of the news frames, valence and sources was undertaken to examine overall trends and patterns in the online coverage of CNN and RT. Content analysis is a research technique for studying and analysing mass media and other communication content in a systematic, objective and quantitative way to measure and compare characteristics in texts (Berelson 1971, p. 18; Krippendorff 2004; Weerakkody 2009; Wimmer & Dominick 1983). According to Wimmer and Dominick (1983), content analysis is useful to identify what exists in mass media content and to describe trends and patterns over time, which makes it a relevant method to this thesis to examine the overall presentation of the Battle of Raqqa in the online coverage of CNN and RT and how this presentation has changed during the battle. Even more relevant is the quantitative character of content analysis, which makes it possible to compare media representations of certain events (Weerakkody 2009, p. 144). In this way, it is possible to make the differences in the online coverage of the Battle of Raqqa between CNN and RT visible.

Although content analysis is useful to examine the overall trends and patterns and compare the coverage of CNN and RT, it cannot make statements about the deeper meaning of a text or the media effects on the audience (Wimmer & Dominick 1983, p. 141). However, using content analysis in combination with frame analysis can partially address this limitation. While content analysis makes it possible to describe the overall trends and patterns and to show the differences in the coverage between both news outlets, frame analysis offers a deeper understanding of each individual online news article from CNN and RT by intensively examining the frames, valence and sources used in the articles. Therefore, the combination of content analysis and frame analysis makes a strong research design to get a more detailed understanding of the way CNN and RT presented the Battle of Raqqa in their online coverage and to explore to what extent their coverage reflects the narratives of their respective government's foreign policy and ideology.

3.2 Application

News outlets

This study examines how the Battle of Raqqa was framed by the U.S. and Russian news media and to what extent this coverage reflects the agendas and narratives of the respective governments in power. CNN and RT were chosen as the most representative international news channels of both countries because of their large global reach and impact (CNN 2018, pp. 142-157; McPhail 2006; RT 2018; Yablokov 2015).

CNN was established by Ted Turner on 1 June 1980 as America's first 24-hour all-news channel (McPhail 2006, p. 143). It reaches over 350 million households in more than 200 nations (CNN 2018; McPhail 2006, p. 143). Even though the U.S. now has more international all-news broadcasters – such as MSNBC and FOX News – CNN was chosen for this study because of its large reach around the world and great impact on government foreign policy and citizens (Gilboa 2005; McPhail 2006, pp. 142-157; Shoemaker & Reese 1996, p. 48).

RT – formerly Russia Today – is a 24-hour global news network based in Moscow, launched on 10 December 2005. According to its own website, the broadcaster is transmitted in over 100 countries and is available to more than some 700 million people (RT 2018). Although critics say that RT is known as the Kremlin's 'propaganda machine' and important international broadcasters such as CNN and BBC mistrust the channel (Bloomfield 2014; Yablokov 2015, p. 301), RT positions itself as absolutely independent and not reflecting Russia's political views (RT 2013). Moreover, with its large reach, it has a significant impact on audiences around the world (Yablokov 2015, p. 312). Therefore, the Russian broadcaster was chosen for this study.

Sampling

The sample population of this study consists of the entirety of online news articles about the Battle of Raqqa of CNN and RT within a timeframe from 6 June 2017 to 1 November 2017. A conscious choice was made for this timeframe. It was on June 6 when the SDF officially launched the military offensive to retake Raqqa and this date thus marks the beginning of the Battle of Raqqa. Although the battle was concluded on 20 October 2017, this thesis also analysed the online articles in the following two weeks to examine how CNN and RT covered follow-up events and developments. The articles from CNN were accessed through the LexisNexis Academic database and the articles from RT were retrieved from its website's search engine. Keywords that were used were 'Battle' and 'Raqqa'. A total of 96 articles were found of which 45 were from CNN and 51 from RT. These articles include news reports,

editorials and commentaries. Besides the articles that were primarily about the Battle of Raqqa, articles about events related to the battle were also coded.

Frame coding

The five common generic frames identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) were counted for each article: conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality and responsibility. The coding criteria for the presence of a frame were based on a questionnaire developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and adapted for this study, which can be found in Appendix A. Moreover, the framing mechanism structured by Entman (1993, p. 52) and Tankard (2001, p. 100) were also used to measure the frames, which includes headlines, subheads, leads, quotes, pull quotes, sources and paragraphs.

Valence coding

As described earlier, the valence was measured by using very loosely defined preconceptions of positive, negative and neutral frames in order to explore new trends and patterns. The valence in this study represents the general sentiment of an article towards the Battle of Raqqa. Positive frames were defined as expressing approving variables towards the Battle of Raqqa and focus on positive outcomes and developments, using keywords such as ‘liberation’ and ‘victory’. Negative frames were defined as focusing on the negative outcomes and developments and include news about casualties, bombardments and refugees, using keywords such as ‘obliteration’ and ‘destruction’. Neutral frames do not expose a judgement of the battle.

Source coding

As discussed in chapter two, sources play a crucial role in the media framing theory. To measure the sources in this analysis, sources are defined as an individual, group or object to whom information is attributed (Berelson 1971; Gans 1979, p. 80). The coding included direct quotes and paraphrases and was done on paragraph level. Not only the type of source was counted but also how often they were cited. To count the sources, it was deliberately chosen not to use predetermined categories of variables. This has been done to prevent important sources or categories from being overlooked. All sources, and their frequency, were counted and written down by name in the code sheet and were later defined and divided into categories, as will be presented in the next chapter.

The code sheet used for the analysis of this study can be found in Appendix B.

Chapter 4

Analysis

This chapter presents the data and results from the analysis. It starts with describing and explaining which articles have been analysed and then gives a review of the frames and valence employed by CNN and RT. Finally, it categorises the news sources drawn upon by the news channels. It will become clear that both CNN and RT both framed the Battle of Raqqa differently. While CNN positively framed the importance of the battle, RT framed the battle negatively by emphasising the impact on the city and its citizens. Whereas the statistics of the frames, valence and sources are presented in tables, the most significant findings are described and discussed more in-depth.

4.1 Articles analysed

Using the keywords ‘Battle’ and ‘Raqqa’, a total of 45 articles from CNN were retrieved via the LexisNexis Academic database, while a total of 51 articles from RT were retrieved from RT’s website’s search engine. After reading the articles extensively several times, a total number of 19 articles from CNN and 34 articles from RT remained which were primarily about the Battle of Raqqa or about events related to the battle. A total number of 11 articles from CNN primarily focused on the Battle of Raqqa against 23 articles from RT. Articles about events related to the battle include topics such as the fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq in general, the U.S.-Russian proxy war and the aftermath of the battle.

While 3 of the 19 stories from CNN put the Battle of Raqqa in the wider context of the fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq in general, 4 of the 34 articles from RT were about the same related topic. However, it is striking that CNN merely focused on the defeat of ISIS, whereas RT emphasised the civilian casualties made by U.S.-led airstrikes during the fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. This is part of an overall pattern in the coverage of CNN and RT in which CNN emphasised the positive aspects of the battle, while RT stressed the negative consequences such as the civilian casualties. This difference in coverage will be further elaborated in the following subchapters.

Furthermore, another 3 articles from CNN were about the related proxy war between the U.S. and Russia, while RT just published 1 article about this topic. Finally, both news channels published a few articles that were about the aftermath of the battle, emphasising the destruction of the city and how it has affected its citizens. As I will show, while RT attributed

the responsibility for the destruction to the U.S.-backed SDF, CNN framed the U.S.-backed SDF as ‘liberators’ and primarily blamed ISIS for the destruction and negative consequences of the battle.

4.2 Framing

First of all, Semetko & Valkenburg’s (2000) frame taxonomy was coded for each article. The most widely employed frame in the online coverage of CNN was the conflict frame, present in more than 50% of the news articles. This corresponds with previous scholarly work which states that in the foreign news coverage media favour the conflict frame over other frames (Cozma & Kozman 2015; De Vreese 2005; Neuman, Just & Crigler 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000). The most widely employed frame in the online coverage of RT, however, was the responsibility frame, apparent in a major third of the news articles. The conflict frame and the morality frame were present in a quarter of the online coverage, followed by the human interest frame. It is striking that the economic consequences frame was not dominant in any of the online coverage of both CNN and RT.

Table 1 – Applying Semetko & Valkenburg’s (2000) frame taxonomy

	CNN		RT	
Frame	Absolute value	Relative value	Absolute value	Relative value
Conflict	13	54.2%	11	24.4%
Human interest	6	25.0%	6	13.3%
Economic consequences	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Morality	1	4.2%	11	24.4%
Responsibility	4	16.7%	17	37.8%
TOTAL	24	100%	45	100%

Note: In some articles more than one frame was present. It was not always possible to determine which frame was more dominant and therefore two frames were coded as dominant. That is the reason why the table shows more frames than articles.

The most noticeable difference between both news outlets is that CNN preferred the conflict frame for the Battle of Raqqa, while RT more often used the responsibility frame. In this way, both news channels presented the battle in a different light, using different angles. CNN primarily used the conflict frame to emphasise the fight between the U.S.-backed SDF and ISIS

in Raqqa, framing ISIS as a 'brutal regime'. The conflict frame was also used to write about the advances made by the U.S.-backed SDF in Raqqa to defeat ISIS. Even though the conflict frame was the second most used frame in RT's online coverage, almost half of these stories were short, one-paragraph articles. This suggests that the conflict frame was of less importance in the online coverage of RT.

More striking is RT's preference for the responsibility frame, which was mainly used to attribute the responsibility for the civilian casualties that were made during the Battle of Raqqa to the U.S.-led airstrikes. In almost every article, RT blamed the U.S.-led coalition for making civilian casualties and not doing enough to protect the citizens. Related to the focus on civilian casualties is the use of the morality frame, which was dominant in a quarter of RT's online coverage. In 7 articles the morality frame was even complementary present to the responsibility frame. In the articles in which the morality frame appeared, the authors focused on the human rights of the citizens and promoted the importance of helping them. The morality frame was also used to talk about the 'hypocritical behaviour' of the U.S. in Raqqa.

A good example of an article with both a responsibility and a morality frame in which the behaviour of the U.S. in Syria is condemned is the article "Staggering loss of civilian life" during US-backed siege of Raqqa – UN' (RT 2017e), in which the author stresses the civilian fatalities inflicted by the U.S.-led coalition by citing United Nations officials. Moreover, the author cites human rights group Human Rights Watch that expresses its concerns about the humanitarian situation in the city. Later in the article, the author writes that 'the US-led coalition is showing "extraordinary hypocrisy" by not abiding by the so-called "red line" it sets for other countries', citing journalist Vanessa Beeley who is very sceptical about the U.S.'s role in Syria. It is striking that the author does not cite any dissenting opinions, which may invite concerns that RT just shows one side of the story.

CNN, on the other hand, employed the morality frame just once. In this article, 'Hundreds of civilians killed since Raqqa offensive began, Amnesty says' (Sirgany & Smith-Spark 2017), the authors focus on the casualties inflicted by the U.S.-led airstrikes. However, they contextualise these casualties by emphasising the gruesome and violent actions of the ISIS rebels, such as its use of citizens as human shields, booby traps and snipers. By doing this, the authors emphasise how important it is to defeat the terrorist organisation and retake Raqqa.

As I have shown, while CNN preferred the conflict frame and emphasised 'ISIS's brutal regime', RT more often used a responsibility and morality frame which criticised the U.S.-led coalition for the civilian casualties inflicted during the battle and raised concerns around the human rights of local citizens. These different aspects of the battle become also visible in CNN

and RT's use of the human interest frame. CNN mainly used the human interest frame to describe how the citizens in Raqqa were negatively affected by the ISIS rebels and to show the strength of the citizens in resisting and fighting these rebels to get their freedom back. A good example that illustrates this is the article 'In the heart of Raqqa, the impact of ISIS is all around' (Abdelaziz 2017), in which a 15-year-old boy says that he could not take the injustice under ISIS control anymore and thus joined the SDF to fight the rebels. At the end of the article, Abdelaziz (2017) cites another citizen fighter who is happy about the arrival of the first CNN journalists: "'You are Americans?' a smiling soldier asks in broken English. 'I love the Trump!'"'. In this case, the human interest frame presents the Battle of Raqqa as a just war.

RT, on the other hand, primarily quoted local citizens to emphasise how the U.S.-led coalition bombed civilians and the city's infrastructure. For example, in the article "'Areas with civilians most bombed out': Raqqa refugees on surviving US-led coalition strikes (VIDEO)" (RT 2017a), the author quotes a refugee who talks about the U.S.-led bombings in the city:

The coalition...it has destroyed the country for sure, this is what has happened, what can I say brother, it killed a lot of civilians, I lost friends and their children, what can I say?

Instead of presenting the Battle of Raqqa as a just war, RT stresses the citizen's condemnation of the U.S.-led coalition's presence in the city.

These findings show that CNN and RT clearly try to emphasise different aspects of the Battle of Raqqa, not only by using different frames but also by using the human interest frame differently. These findings would also seem to confirm that both news channels covered the Battle of Raqqa in favour of their respective government's foreign policy and ideology, which I will further develop in the next chapter.

4.3 The valence of the news articles

Besides the five generic frames, the valence of each article was also coded. Valence refers to the overall tone of voice of a news story, which can be positive or negative (De Vreese & Boomgaarden 2003, p. 363). The analysis found a noticeable difference between the valence of the news stories from CNN and RT. While CNN framed more than 50% of its online stories about the Battle of Raqqa positively, RT only used a positive frame in 3% of its online coverage. On the other hand, RT preferred a negative tone of voice, apparent in 65% of its online articles, whereas CNN used a negative frame in 21% of its online coverage. Previous scholarly research found that positively framed news stories can lead to a significantly higher level of support for

government policy than negatively framed news stories (De Vreese & Boomgaarden 2003; Nelson, Clawson & Oxley 1997). However, it is beyond the scope of this study to examine how the frames affected the public's support for government policy during the Battle of Raqqa. Nevertheless, given that there was a higher positive framing of the battle by CNN, it is significant that the CNN readers might have a more supportive attitude towards the involvement of the U.S. government in the Battle of Raqqa, while readers of RT might be more critical about the U.S.-led operation in the city. Finally, the difference between the articles with a neutral valence is small. While CNN used a neutral frame in 26% of its online stories, RT framed 32% of its online articles neutrally.

Table 2 – The valence of the news frames

	CNN		RT	
Valence	Absolute value	Relative value	Absolute value	Relative value
Positive	10	52.6%	1	2.9%
Negative	4	21.1%	22	64.7%
Neutral	5	26.3%	11	32.4%
TOTAL	19	100%	34	100%

The most striking difference in the coverage of CNN and RT is that, in general, CNN framed the Battle of Raqqa positively, while RT preferred to employ a negative valence of the news frames in its online coverage. First of all, the difference in valence is demonstrated through the angle chosen by both news outlets. As already described in subchapter 4.1, CNN described ISIS as a 'brutal regime'. Related to this, CNN stressed the importance of defeating ISIS and thereby put the Battle of Raqqa and the advances of the U.S.-backed SDF during the fight in a positive light. A good example is the article 'Fighters surround ISIS-controlled Raqqa in Syria, commander says' (Sterling & Balkiz 2017), in which the authors state that 'capturing Raqqa would be a major achievement in the battle against ISIS and help bring an end to its brutal experiment of creating an Islamic caliphate'. This sentence emphasises the importance of the Battle of Raqqa and might leave the readers with a positive attitude towards the battle. Moreover, it is striking that these are the authors' own words instead of a quote from a source, which suggests subjective reporting. Significantly, it is also noticeable that the negatively framed articles from CNN do not primarily focus on the Battle of Raqqa itself. While 2 of the

4 negatively framed articles stressed the actions from ISIS and how this affected the citizens in Raqqa, another 2 articles were about the related U.S.-Russian proxy war.

RT, on the other hand, primarily stressed the negative aspects of the battle. The Russian news channel often emphasised the civilian casualties. RT attributed the responsibility for these casualties to the U.S.-led airstrikes and blamed the U.S.-led coalition for not doing enough to protect civilian lives. A total of 19 of the 22 negatively framed articles were about civilian casualties. A good example is the article 'Kids were playing outside as coalition strike "directly targeted" Raqqa civilians – witness to RT' (RT 2017d), in which the author quotes several citizens who blame the U.S.-led airstrikes for directly targeting civilians and the use of white phosphorus which is, according to Amnesty International, against international law. The author also quotes Nicolas Davies, author of the book *Blood on our Hands*, who states that the U.S.-led coalition is not taking responsibility for the civilian casualties. Overall, the article sketches a very negative framing of the Battle of Raqqa and clearly directs blame towards the U.S.-led coalition for casualties and the destruction of infrastructure.

Besides the angle of the news articles, the keywords that CNN and RT used to refer to the Battle of Raqqa also play an important role in the news outlet's positive and negative framing. Although CNN and RT both used neutral words such as 'offensive', 'campaign' and 'operation' to describe the battle, both news outlets also used loaded language. While RT preferred negatively loaded words, CNN more often employed positive keywords. For example, RT described the battle as a 'siege' in 14 articles and even used the words 'assault' and 'attack' sometimes, while CNN preferred to write in terms of 'liberation' and 'victory'. Even though RT also used the keyword 'liberation' to refer to the Battle of Raqqa, they often employed it in a sarcastic way. A good example is the article '"Dogs eating bodies": Witnesses recall the horrors of US-led liberation of Raqqa' (RT 2017b), in which the author writes about the 'horrors' of the 'liberation'. The author cites citizens who fled Raqqa, describing the 'grim' fight between the U.S.-led SDF and ISIS. Later in the article, the author emphasises the civilian deaths inflicted by the U.S.-led airstrikes. While the author refers to the battle as a 'liberation', given that the overall tone of the article is negative, the reader could be easily left with the impression that the author is being cynical or sarcastic in his use of the word 'liberation'.

Finally, the way both news outlets wrote about the end of the Battle of Raqqa is also of key importance in demonstrating the positive and negative framing of the battle. On 20 October 2017, the day that the U.S.-backed SDF declared the official defeat of ISIS in Raqqa, CNN posted the article 'Raqqa: US-backed forces declare "total liberation" of ISIS stronghold' (Damon, Balkiz & Smith-Spark 2017), in which the authors cite the U.S.-backed militias who

declared the ‘total liberation’ of the city. The authors merely quote U.S. and SDF officials who speak in positive terms about the recapture of Raqqa, referring to it as a ‘liberation’, ‘celebration’ and ‘historic victory’. The authors also cite the U.S.’s former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson who congratulates the SDF and the Syrian people on the ‘liberation’ of Raqqa and calls the defeat a ‘critical milestone’ in the fight against the terrorist organisation. Two days later, RT published a story showing a completely different aspect of the defeat. In the article ‘Victory through annihilation: Ruin, death & discord left after US-led coalition takes Raqqa’ (RT 2017g), the author emphasises the ‘virtual annihilation’ of Raqqa after the U.S.-backed SDF recaptured the city. The author also emphasises the civilian casualties and displaced people caused by the U.S.-led coalition. Furthermore, the author quotes the Russian Major-General Igor Konashenkov who calls the ‘victory’ of Raqqa an ‘obliteration’ – further emphasising the negative association. It is noticeable that the article does not name any positive aspect of the defeat of ISIS in Raqqa.

It is striking that CNN and RT framed the defeat of ISIS totally differently. To put it simply – while CNN emphasised the positive outcomes, RT preferred to write about the negative aspects. Such a polarising contrast may invite accusations that both news outlets lacked balance in their coverage of the Battle of Raqqa. Furthermore, while both news outlets primarily used quotes from their respective government officials to write about the defeat of ISIS in Raqqa, these resulted in starkly contrasting value statements between CNN and RT which tended to reflect government foreign policy and ideology. This will be further elaborated in the next chapter.

4.4 Sources

Since sources are important to the overall framing of a news story (Cozma 2015, p. 437; Entman 1993, pp. 56-57; Liebler & Bendix 1996; Shoemaker & Reese 1996, pp. 169-173), the types of sources and their frequency were also coded for each article. The sources were coded paragraph by paragraph and later defined and divided into categories, as presented in table 3 below. In terms of attribution patterns, CNN relied on U.S. government officials in almost 50% of its online coverage, followed by SDF officials and then other international government officials. The most frequently cited source in the online coverage of RT is the United Nations with over 20%, followed by the U.S. government officials and Raqqa citizens.

Table 3 – Appearance of the types of news sources and their frequency

Source	CNN		RT	
	Absolute value	Relative value	Absolute value	Relative value
SDF officials	26	12.2%	14	3.5%
Kurdish officials	10	4.7%	12	3.0%
U.S. government officials	105	49.3%	79	19.7%
Russian government officials	7	3.3%	10	2.5%
Syrian government officials	0	0.0%	9	2.2%
Other international government officials	16	7.5%	18	4,5%
Human rights groups	8	3.8%	16	4.0%
United Nations	2	0.9%	88	21.9%
War monitors	3	1.4%	20	5.0%
Experts	8	3.8%	22	5.5%
Raqqa citizens	14	6.6%	43	10.7%
Volunteer fighters	5	2.3%	20	5.0%
Activists	5	2.3%	0	0.0%
Local media/ journalists	2	0.9%	26	6.5%
International media/ journalists	2	0.9%	15	3.7%
Other	0	0.0%	9	2.2%
TOTAL	213	100%	401	100%

Note: The category 'other' only consists of family members of volunteer fighters who were quoted in two articles from RT.

Both CNN and RT heavily relied on official sources, which corresponds with previous scholars who found that news media and journalists often rely on the same kind of government sources and public officials (Bennett 1990; Gans 1979, pp. 144-145; Sigal 1973). However, there is a difference in the type of official sources they used. While CNN preferred to quote U.S. government officials, the most cited source in the coverage of RT is United Nations officials, used in over 20% of its online coverage. It is striking that CNN only used the United Nations in less than 1% of its total coverage. A possible explanation for this significant difference in information attribution patterns is the different aspects of the Battle of Raqqa that both news outlets try to emphasise. While CNN primarily used U.S. government officials to write about the importance of the Battle of Raqqa and the advances made by the SDF, RT often cited United Nations officials to write about civilian casualties inflicted during the U.S.-led airstrikes and to emphasise the concern of the United Nations about the toll the Battle of Raqqa is taking on civilians. The almost total exclusion of United Nations officials in the coverage of CNN raises some serious concerns about the objectivity of the news channel. Even though journalists are limited in covering a story by, among other things, time, money, safety and accessibility of sources, the United Nations is an easy source to reach. The fact that CNN almost completely excluded this type of source may invite accusations of biased reporting and put the watchdog ideal of journalism under pressure, which will be further discussed in chapter 5.

Furthermore, the heavy reliance on U.S. government officials of both news outlets makes sense in the case of the Battle of Raqqa. Since Raqqa has been one of the most isolated places on earth and journalists were not allowed to enter the war zone, information inevitably came from mainly U.S. government officials who led the offensive in the city. However, an important note to make here is that RT often used U.S.-government officials to emphasise negative aspects of the battle instead of emphasising the importance of it, as CNN did. A good example is the article "If US aerial bombings don't kill Raqqa citizens, ISIS snipers will" (RT 2017c), in which the author interviews former Pentagon official Michael Maloof who criticises the U.S.-led airstrikes in Raqqa. He says that the U.S. is not taking the 'necessary precautions' when they perform airstrikes in the city. He blames the Pentagon for being willing to accept civilian casualties in pursuit of 'high-value targets', such as ISIS rebels in Raqqa. He also states that the Pentagon does not do enough to investigate the airstrikes in which civilians lose their life. All these quotes emphasise the negative behaviour of the U.S. in Raqqa.

Following the established notion that sources can be key to the overall frame of an article (Cozma 2015; Entman 1993; Liebler & Bendix 1996; Shoemaker & Reese 1996), as I have shown here, CNN and RT both emphasised different aspects of the Battle of Raqqa through

source choices. While CNN preferred to quote U.S. officials to highlight the importance of the battle, RT often relied on United Nations officials to stress the civilian casualties. Moreover, it is striking that RT often used U.S. government officials to emphasise negative aspects and developments of the battle instead of stressing the importance of it. The differences in source choice and quote selection between both news outlets seem to reflect political divisions of their respective governments, which I will further explain in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The previous chapter presented the data and results from the analysis and showed how CNN and RT both framed the Battle of Raqqa differently by emphasising different aspects. This chapter will discuss the significance and broader concerns of these results. It starts with answering the first research question about the differences in framing between CNN and RT by summarising the results of the previous chapter. To answer the second research question, I will then show that it is highly likely that the coverage of both news outlets reflects the narratives of their government's foreign policy and ideology. Finally, I will reflect on the media practice of both CNN and RT and discuss how their online coverage affects the watchdog ideal of journalism.

5.1 The same battle, different narratives

The first aim of this study was to identify and compare how CNN and RT both framed the Battle of Raqqa in their online coverage, as formulated in my first research question:

RQ 1: How did CNN and RT frame the Battle of Raqqa in their online coverage and what are the differences between both news channels?

As presented in the previous chapter, CNN and RT framed the Battle of Raqqa differently. By using different angles and sources to cover the battle, both news channels emphasised different aspects. CNN primarily emphasised 'ISIS's brutal regime' and thereby stressed how important the Battle of Raqqa was to defeat the terrorist organisation. In this way, CNN put the battle in a positive light and mainly used the conflict frame to talk about the advances that were made by the U.S.-backed SDF. Moreover, CNN described the battle as a 'liberation' and wrote about a 'victory' when ISIS was defeated in Raqqa. RT, on the other hand, primarily stressed the civilian casualties. By mainly employing the responsibility frame, RT attributed the responsibility for these casualties to the U.S.-led airstrikes. Related to RT's use of the responsibility frame was the morality frame to write about the U.S.'s 'hypocritical behaviour' in Raqqa. Instead of framing the battle as 'liberation' or 'victory', RT preferred to write about the battle as a 'siege' and framed the defeat of ISIS as an 'annihilation' of the city.

Although the importance of the frames and valence of the stories, one of the most noteworthy contributions and a key finding of this study is the difference in source choice between both news outlets. While CNN most often relied on U.S. government officials to talk about the Battle of Raqqa and the advances made by the U.S.-backed SDF, RT most often relied on United Nations officials to emphasise the casualties and the destruction of the city. Even though the United Nations is an easy source to reach, CNN excluded this source in almost its entire online coverage. Without asking the journalists and editors involved in the stories as to why the United Nations officials were not approached, it is difficult to know why this is the case. One guess could be that this type of source is not in line with CNN's narrative about the battle. If this is indeed the case, it raises some serious concerns about the watchdog ideal of journalism and may invite accusations of biased reporting, which will be further discussed in subchapter 5.3.

As I have shown, even though both news outlets covered the same battle, they were not telling the same story. While CNN emphasised the importance of the battle and mainly excluded the civilian casualties, RT stressed the civilian casualties and primarily excluded the importance of the defeat of ISIS. In this way, the 'frame-building' process of emphasising certain issues and topics while omitting or marginalising others, as described by De Vreese (2005, p. 52), is very obvious in the online coverage of CNN and RT. These differences in reporting on the Battle of Raqqa can be explained through the one-sided symbiotic relationship between media and foreign policy which can sometimes occur.

5.2 The influence of the government's foreign policy and ideology

The second aim of this study was to explore the relationship between the coverage of CNN and RT and their respective government's foreign policy and ideology, as formulated in my second research question:

RQ 2: To what extent does the coverage of the Battle of Raqqa of CNN and RT reflect the narratives of their respective government's foreign policy and ideology?

To answer this research question, it is necessary to compare the political and ideological views of the U.S. and Russian government about the Battle of Raqqa with the online coverage of CNN and RT. Following the rivalry between the U.S. and Russia in Syria and their conflicting interests in defeating ISIS in Raqqa (Micallef 2016; O'Connor 2017), government officials from both countries framed the Battle of Raqqa in their own favour. While the U.S.'s former

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson emphasised the importance of the battle and talked about ‘liberation’ (Tillerson 2017), chief spokesman for the Russian Defence Ministry Major-General Igor Konashenkov stressed the bombardments and civilian casualties (Osborn 2017). By comparing these government statements with the online coverage of both news outlets, it seems highly likely that the coverage of both news outlets reflects the narratives of their respective government’s foreign policy and ideology. While CNN, just like Tillerson, emphasised the importance of the battle in defeating ISIS and used keywords such as ‘liberation’ and ‘victory’, RT stressed the civilian casualties and the destruction of the city, which is more in line with the statement of the Russian Defence Ministry. The source choice of CNN and RT plays a key role. Both news channels relied on sources that often articulated their respective government’s foreign policy and ideology. While CNN most often relied on U.S. government officials to emphasise the importance of the battle, RT preferred to use United Nations officials to talk about civilian casualties and the destruction of the city’s infrastructure.

The similarities between the official statements of the U.S. and Russian government and the online coverage of CNN and RT become even more obvious in the source choice of both news outlets after the defeat of ISIS in Raqqa. Both news channels merely quoted government officials from their own country, excluding any counterargument. In the CNN article ‘Raqqa: US-backed forces declare "total liberation" of ISIS stronghold’ (Damon, Balkiz & Smith-Spark 2017), the authors quote the official statement of Rex Tillerson (2017), in which he expresses himself positively about the battle and calls the retake of Raqqa a ‘liberation’ and a ‘critical milestone’ in the global fight against ISIS. It is striking that the authors do not use the statement of the spokesman for the Russian Defence Ministry Major-General Igor Konashenkov or any other source that is negative or sceptical about the battle. RT, on the other hand, does the exact same thing. In the article ‘victory through annihilation: Ruin, death & discord left after US-led coalition takes Raqqa’ (RT 2017g), the author quotes Major-General Igor Konashenkov who calls the ‘victory’ in Raqqa an ‘obliteration’ of the city. In another article a week later, ‘US-led coalition celebrates Raqqa "liberation" over the bodies of their victims – Damascus’ (RT 2017f), the author, again, quotes Konashenkov when he compares the Battle of Raqqa with the fate of Dresden: “Raqqa’s fate calls to mind that of Dresden in 1945, leveled by the US-British bombings," the Russian Defence Ministry said earlier, referring to the controversial WWII campaign.’ Just like CNN, RT does not quote any sources that put the Battle of Raqqa in a positive light.

Although some scholars advocate the CNN-effect which states that the media have the power to influence the government foreign policy (Gilboa 2005; McPhail 2006, pp. 156-157),

this theory seems unlikely in the case of the Battle of Raqqa. Since Raqqa was one of the most isolated places in the world and journalists were not allowed to enter the city, these findings suggest that CNN and RT reflect the agendas and narratives preferred by their respective governments. This is more in line with the propaganda model developed by Herman and Chomsky (2008). This socio-economic theory contests the CNN-effect by stating that the news media serve as a tool to mobilize support for the government policy (Herman & Chomsky 2008, pp. 1-33). One of the structural factors on which the propaganda model is based on is the heavy reliance on government sources (Herman & Chomsky 2008, p. 2), which became particularly obvious in the online coverage of CNN. It became even more obvious in the coverage of CNN and RT after the defeat of ISIS in which both news outlets merely quoted government sources from their own country to write about the defeat of the terrorist organisation in Raqqa. However, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to talk about ‘propaganda’ since no propaganda model analysis has been carried out. For this reason, I prefer to talk in terms of ‘contextual objectivity’ as described by El-Nawawy and Iskandar (2003, p. 209). In this context, journalists try to be as objective as possible in their coverage but colouring it with the perspective of the medium they work for, which explains why the coverage of the same conflict can differ between each country’s news organisation. In the case of the Battle of Raqqa, both CNN and RT presented the battle differently, reflecting the dominant narratives and biases of their respective governments. Therefore, the ‘contextual objectivity’ in this case may invite accusations of biased reporting which raises concerns about the watchdog ideal of journalism.

5.3 The watchdog ideal under pressure

In chapter two, I have discussed the idealised role of journalists as watchdogs of society and the importance of it for a functioning democracy. McNair (2009, p. 239) states that journalists are the watchdogs of our society who monitor the government’s use and abuse of power. To fulfil this role as watchdog, media coverage should be objective, factual and critical and journalists should challenge the government powers (Hanitzsch 2007, p. 373; Waisbord 2000). Furthermore, journalists should be as ‘neutral’ and ‘detached’ as possible (McNair 2009, pp. 238-239). However, looking at the online coverage of the Battle of Raqqa of CNN and RT, the watchdog ideal does not appear to be a priority for either news agency. Instead of monitoring the government’s use and abuse of power and challenging it, it seems more likely that CNN and RT reflected the narratives of their respective governments in power during the Battle of Raqqa. By emphasising different aspects of the battle and using different frames and sources, it becomes doubtful to what extent the coverage of both news outlets really was ‘objective’.

‘factual’ and ‘critical’ and whether the reporters were really ‘neutral’ and ‘detached’. This raises some serious concerns about the sustainability of the watchdog ideal and may change the way we should think about foreign journalism and conflict reporting.

Although both news outlets lacked balanced reporting during the battle, it was especially the source choice of CNN that raises concerns about the watchdog ideal and may even invite accusations of biased reporting. As I already noted, a key finding of this study is that CNN most often relied on U.S. government officials, while RT preferred to quote United Nations officials. Whereas RT’s second most cited source is U.S. government officials, CNN only cited the United Nations twice. Although it is difficult to know why CNN almost totally excluded United Nations officials in their coverage without asking the journalists and editors involved in the stories, a conceivable reason may be that it does not fit the news outlet’s narrative about the Battle of Raqqa. The United Nations stressed the civilian casualties and destruction of the city, while CNN preferred to exclude this aspect of the battle. An important note to make related to this accusation is that the United Nations is an easily accessible source of information. While journalists in conflict zones are limited in covering a story by source accessibility which can make it hard to cover both sides of a conflict, this is not the case with the United Nations. Their reports are easy to access online and therefore not hard to include in a story. Therefore, it seems highly likely that CNN consciously has chosen to exclude the United Nations and to use other sources that fit its narrative better. As a consequence, it opens up this coverage to accusations of biased reporting. However, this does not mean that the online coverage of RT is more objective, critical or balanced. On the contrary, the Russian news channel also just emphasised one aspect of the conflict and even went beyond that by demonizing the U.S.’s role in Raqqa.

The U.S. as the culprit

As earlier indicated by Yablokov (2015), little academic research has been done on the coverage of RT. Therefore, this study is important because it reveals some interesting, preliminary findings about how the news outlet works. Although CNN and RT both emphasised certain aspects of the Battle of Raqqa and told a different narrative about the battle, RT went beyond that by stressing the ‘hypocritical behaviour’ of the U.S. in Raqqa. As Yablokov (2015, p. 312) already concluded in a previous study on RT, the Russian news outlet exposes the U.S.’s role in world conflicts and presents the U.S. as a ‘major international threat’. He even states that RT has a clear ‘anti-American stance’ (Yablokov 2015, p. 312). The results of this study support Yablokov’s (2015) findings. A good example of RT’s ‘anti-American stance’ in the coverage of RT is the article “Staggering loss of civilian life” during US-backed siege of Raqqa – UN’

(RT 2017e). In the article, the author writes that ‘the US-led coalition is showing “extraordinary hypocrisy” by not abiding by the so-called “red line” it sets for other countries’, quoting journalist Vanessa Beeley who is very sceptical about the U.S.’s presence in Syria and accuses the U.S. of destroying Raqqa because they try to hide something from the Syrian Army. While the article stresses negative aspects of the U.S.’s role in Raqqa, the author does not cite any dissenting opinion or counterargument, which raises concerns about the objectivity of RT and the underlying goal of its coverage.

Although this thesis consists of a small case study, the pattern I have shown of an ‘anti-American stance’ clearly has implications for how we define the role of journalism and the precarious nature of the watchdog ideal. Moreover, since RT has the power to reach the domestic audience in the U.S. (Yablokov 2015, p. 312), it is worth further study to explore how RT operates and what the possible effects of its coverage are, especially given the current tendencies and proxy wars between the U.S. and Russia in Syria in particular and the Middle East in general.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The liberal conception of journalists as watchdogs of society emphasises the importance of objective, factual and critical coverage to impart knowledge and protect the democratic process and its citizens. However, this watchdog ideal can come under pressure when the equal balance of symbiotic relations which can form between media and state becomes one-sided. As I have shown in the reporting of the Battle of Raqqa of CNN and RT, the coverage of political conflicts overseas can differ between nations and possibly reflects the agendas and narratives preferred by the government in power.

The purpose of this study was twofold. The first aim was to examine how the Battle of Raqqa was framed by the two largest international news outlets in the U.S. and Russia – CNN and RT – and what differences there were between both broadcasters. Secondly, this thesis explored to what extent the coverage of both news channels reflects their respective government's foreign policy and ideology. The analysis found that both news outlets framed the Battle of Raqqa differently. While CNN framed the battle positively by emphasising how important the battle was to defeat ISIS, RT used a negative tone of voice by primarily stressing the civilian casualties inflicted by U.S.-led airstrikes and the destruction of the city. This way of framing the Battle of Raqqa corresponds to how government officials from both news outlets' countries talked about the battle. Since hardly any journalist was allowed to enter the war zone, inevitably these findings suggest that CNN and RT relied upon a limited pool of sources which often articulated their government's foreign policy or preferred narratives of the conflict. As a consequence, it opens up this coverage to accusations of failing to cover the battle in an objective, balanced and neutral way. Even though this thesis consists of a small case study and much more research will have to be done, the results implicate a certain degree of subjectivity and government dependency in foreign and conflict reporting which contradicts the idealised role of journalists as watchdogs of society.

The findings of this study not only contribute to the media framing theory by extending it to a new case study of a contemporary conflict, but it also contributes to filling several gaps in a number of areas within the scholarly literature around conflict reporting. Firstly, given that the U.S. and Russia are both important global powers in the Syrian conflict and the fight against ISIS in the country, directly comparing the coverage of the defeat of ISIS in Raqqa by their largest international news outlets – CNN and RT – was largely missing from the existing

scholarly work. This study fills that gap and shows how both news outlets operate, and it proves that CNN and RT both framed the battle in a different, unbalanced way. Directly comparing the media practice of U.S. and Russian media is especially relevant nowadays, given the current tendencies and proxy wars between the U.S. and Russia in Syria in particular and the Middle East in general. Secondly, this study fills the gap of research on RT. Even though there is a lot of criticism on the coverage of RT in the journalistic field, little academic research has been done. Therefore, this study is important since it reveals some interesting, preliminary findings about the online coverage of the news channel. For example, RT's preference for the responsibility frame which is surprising because it deviates from earlier scholarly work which indicated that in the foreign news reporting journalists favour the conflict frame over other frames (Cozma & Kozman 2015; De Vreese 2005; Neuman, Just & Crigler 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000). The most striking expression of this is the continuous emphasising of the U.S.'s 'hypocritical behaviour', earlier described by Yablokov (2015, p. 312) as the channel's 'anti-American stance', which might implicate a certain degree of subjectivity or even propaganda in the coverage of RT. However, it would be going too far to define this as propaganda since no rigorous propaganda model analysis has been carried out. Therefore, I would like to make a note about RT's 'anti-American stance' to differentiate the possible significance and implication of it. Although Western media negate RT's credibility by stating that it is the Kremlin's propaganda channel, this thesis is not intended to feed any anti-Russian bias. Indeed, I would argue that RT could do better. Nevertheless, this also applies to the coverage of CNN and its heavy reliance on U.S. government sources and exclusion of United Nations officials. I feel that I have equally applied my framing matrix to both CNN and RT as transparently as possible. As I have shown, neither news channel comes out as reflecting the watchdog ideal. Related to this, future research should analyse the Battle of Aleppo in which a Russian-led coalition recaptured the city instead of a U.S.-led coalition. It is interesting to examine how CNN and RT both covered this conflict to explore if the patterns found in this analysis might turn around and whether a possible 'anti-Russian stance' appears in the coverage of CNN.

Despite the relevance and contribution of this thesis, there are a number of limitations. First of all, this study was limited to the online coverage of CNN and RT and it merely analysed the text of the news articles. Therefore, future research should also focus on the news bulletins and television shows of both news outlets and analyse the online images and photos to get a better idea of how both news channels framed the Battle of Raqqa. It is also important for future research to conduct interviews with the journalists from CNN and RT who were involved in

the stories to explore how the framing of the Battle of Raqqa came about. A second limitation of this study is that the analysis merely focused on one U.S. and one Russian news medium. It would be useful, however, to analyse more U.S. and Russian news media to find out whether the argument remains intact. Future research should also include Russian language media and compare their coverage to the coverage of RT and other U.S. news media. Another recommendation for future research is to analyse news media from more nations that were involved or had interest in the Battle of Raqqa – such as France, Germany, United Kingdom, Syria, Turkey and Iran – and extend the analysis to more battles, such as the battles in Deir ez-Zor in Eastern Syria and Mosul in Iraq. Finally, it was out of the scope of this study to examine the effects that the differences in coverage possibly have on the citizens. Given that the frames and sources that are employed by journalists may influence people's knowledge about an event and the way they think about political institutions and their policy, future research should organise interviews and focus groups to find out how U.S. and Russian citizens think about the Battle of Raqqa and how they think about each other's countries. This moves the scope of the research from 'frame-building' to 'frame-setting'.

Even though a lot of research still needs to be done, this thesis offers some useful findings about how news media can become aligned with their government's foreign policy and ideology and the possible consequences this may have for the idealised role of journalists as watchdogs or part of a fourth estate. Additionally, given Russia's increasing presence on the global stage and concerns around 'fake news' and its influence on foreign elections and politics, this study reveals some interesting findings about the widely unexplored Russian news outlet RT.

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Appendix A

Measuring the generic frames

To measure the presence of the five generic frames identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), a list of questions for each frame has been formulated. The questions are based on a questionnaire developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and adapted to analyse the online news articles about the Battle of Raqqa from CNN and RT. If a question can be answered with yes, it means that the frame is present. These questions were the leading thread in identifying the presence of the five most common generic frames: conflict frame, human interest frame, economic consequences frame, morality frame and responsibility frame.

Conflict frame

1. Does the article reflect disagreements between individuals, parties, groups, institutions or countries regarding the Battle of Raqqa?
2. Does one individual, party, group, institution or country reproach another?
3. Does the article refer to winners and losers regarding the Battle of Raqqa?
4. Does the article oppose or criticize the Battle of Raqqa?

Human interest frame

5. Does the article provide a human face on the Battle of Raqqa?
6. Does the article include adjectives that generate feelings of empathy, sympathy or compassion?
7. Does the article include personal stories about the lives of the actors of the Battle of Raqqa?
8. Does the article focus on how the Battle of Raqqa affects the citizens?

Economic consequences frame

9. Does the article mention financial losses or gains – now or in the future – regarding the Battle of Raqqa?
10. Does the article involve a degree of expense regarding the Battle of Raqqa?
11. Does the article refer to economic consequences, in either a positive or negative way?

Morality frame

12. Does the article refer to religious/moral grounds, god or other religious tenets regarding the Battle of Raqqa?
13. Does the article include social prescriptions of how to behave?
14. Does the article promote the moral importance of helping citizens and victims?
15. Does the article mention the human rights of the citizens and victims?

Responsibility frame

16. Does the article attribute the responsibility of the Battle of Raqqa and its developments – positive or negative – to any individual, party, group, institution or country?
17. Does the article suggest that U.S. or Russian government – or any other government – has the ability to alleviate or solve the Battle of Raqqa?
18. Does the article suggest a solution to the Battle of Raqqa?
19. Does the article suggest that the Battle of Raqqa requires urgent action?

Appendix B

Code sheet

1. Article number:
2. News website: *CNN.com/ RT.com*
3. Article headline:
4. Date of publication, mm/dd/yy: (/ /)
5. Number of words:
6. Number of paragraphs:
7. Dominant generic frame: *conflict frame/ human interest frame/ economic consequences frame/ morality frame/ responsibility frame*
8. Valence of the frames: *positive/ negative/ neutral*
9. Notes for patterns and trends regarding the valence of the frames:

10. Sources:

Source name	Frequency
1.	
2.	
3.	
Etc.	

11. General notes:

Appendix C

Online articles CNN and RT

The articles from CNN and RT that are mentioned below were used in the analysis and discussion chapters to describe and discuss the trends and patterns that were found in the online coverage of both news channels more in-depth. However, this is just a small selection of the total sample size of this study. While only these articles were used to support the findings and results, the total sample size of this thesis consists of 53 articles from both CNN and RT.

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